

With the Author's Compliments

ETHICS OF WAR

A PAPER

BY

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READ BEFORE THE CLUB.

BARRIE, ONTARIO

PRINTED AT THE EXAMINER NEWSPAPER OFFICE

1887.

AC901

P3

no. 1618

P444



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One charming midsummer's day, a few years ago, we witnessed some exceptional military drill evolutions on the historic ground of Niagara. From an elevated spot we saw the troops of prancing, restless cavalry, and long lines of artillery, the brilliant sunlight bearing down upon the sleek, shining coats of the horses, and dazzling coruscations glist from the burnished arms and accoutrements of their riders. Converging from several quarters, various regiments—some clad in bright, scarlet tunics, others in dark green or black uniforms—were moving towards the brigade ground to participate in their morning evolutions. At the distance of our view, and without seriously thinking upon the subject, it was difficult to decide which most to admire—the sombre-garbed, ominous and practical looking "Rifles," or the gay and spirited-looking Infantry. Borne on the wings of a delightful breeze the strains of more than half a score of carefully trained bands reach the ear, producing sensations "felt in the blood and all along the heart"—imparting to all not totally inert and pulseless a sense of new and invigorated life. Only the fewest in this country can have been privileged to listen to the terrific and heart-arousing music, with full orchestral chorus, of Handel's "Gird on thy sword," but feelings probably not much inferior to those inspired by the recital of this mighty composition arose even then within the breasts of the assembled thousands, announcing once again, that stern defiance, that indomitable pluck, that pith and valor, within the British heart, to which history bears indubitable testimony through all ages. Every wise man yearns that the day when the grim contests of war must be enacted, may be long, long delayed; but while the fervent Christian prayer of "Give peace in our time, O, Lord," should be the guiding principle of action, it is certain that no country is wisely governed that allows itself to repose in fancied security, without the means of repelling invasion by a foreigner, or promptly stamping out rebellion. The completest victory is not that which entirely avoids a contest, but that which

leave the least evidence of struggle. The feelings inspired in the writer by the scene just represented led up to a few serious thoughts on the ethics of war, which have since been crystalized into the following brief paper on this subject:

Comparatively recent data have been afforded to the civilized world to justify the conclusion that crime and disorderly conduct are scarcely known in the armies of the old world, while in active service, which not only marks a great advance in the moral and intellectual training of the classes from which European soldiers are now taken, but suggests doubts whether war itself has, necessarily, those brutalizing tendencies which are popularly attributed to its process, even by those who by no means coincide in the extreme doctrine that it is never justifiable except as a measure of immediate defense. Such doubts have at times been considerably strengthened by a perusal of letters written by soldiers from the seat of war to their homes, in which it would be difficult to say whether a brave endurance of discomfort, an heroic exultation in danger faced and overcome, or a kindly flow of home affections, were the most striking characteristics. That which calls forth in those engaged it—endurance, sagacity, promptness in resource, presence of mind, self-control, and contempt of death—which knits together officers and men by the strongest ties of mutual respect and admiration, by the sense of danger shared and services rendered, by the tenderness and sympathy elicited towards the sick and wounded—can hardly be in itself the wholly evil thing popular opinion is accustomed in our day to regard it—unless we are prepared to adopt the epicurean sentiment which would make comfort the chief good, and pain—

“The something in this world amiss,
To be unriddled by-and-bye.”

True, these facts do not prove that war is not in itself an evil; and, unquestionably, if men were perfect, war would cease. But the question really is, whether men being what they are, wars are not among the modes of human activity by which man's spirit is trained to perfection and the ancient throne of wrong and sensuality, of weakness and cowardice, even of mere brute worship made to totter to its fall. Unlike the conflict man wages with nature, in war he stands opposed to his fellow-man, and its immediate object is the destruction of human life and the works of human industry. But if the operations of Providence

on nature be our guide in this matter, it is not thence that we can draw the moral that evil is to be encountered, and good sought, only on condition of not destroying the lives and works of men. We humbly trust, and we are learning slowly to perceive that the pestilence that walketh by noonday, and smiteth the thousands in our cities, is sent on a mission of healing, sent expressly to slothful and careless men, whose neglect of the laws of health is entailing incessant loss of life and deterioration of human and bodily powers. The plague smiteth fiercely, but with a passing blow; if we learn our lesson its good effects last forever. Men are fallible and God is allwise, it may be answered, and men must not imitate the awful agencies of their Maker, because they cannot be sure that they will use them aright. To which we reply that man must act by the best light he has, and that the powers given him are lawfully used if used with righteous purpose; and that when other means of suppressing wrong have been tried in vain, we have no alternative but to let wrong prevail, or to meet and conquer it by armed force. This appears to us a conclusive argument against banishing war from amongst the legitimate means of resisting evil. Mere destruction is no more the real and ultimate object of war than it is of the Arctic expedition, the exploration of Africa, or other noble enterprises in which life is risked. The real object of all justifiable war is to secure the triumph of what is assumed to be right, where human diplomacy has failed to apply the agency of the Law and that *combined force* of all against one, which is the strength of Law. Nor could the theorists who condemn war, irrespective of its cause or motive, find it easy either to "justify the ways of God to man," or to approve of any of those enterprises in which life is staked against success, for surely men are no less bound to regard their own lives as sacred than those of others. How, too, will they justify capital punishment, or any punishment that inflicts bodily pain, and injures health? Even the ordinary social mechanism, if strictly probed, the common occupations of men, the systems of labor that accumulate wealth at the expense of the health and vigor of the laborer, would scarcely stand the consistent application of the Peace theory. Upon the whole, it would appear, looking into these considerations, that the common sentiment about war needs some revision. Men naturally abhor blood and wounds, pains and mutilated limbs, and regard with instinctive awe the departure of the spirit from its home of flesh—an awe that is vastly deepened

when such separation is sudden and violent. May such abhorrence never be less ; may such awe never cease to regard with its mysterious sanctity the sacred life of man ! But if man is sent into the world not to eat, sleep, and enjoy the banquet of the senses, but to vanquish the evil that is in himself, and in the world ; if no effort, no sacrifice of comfort and happiness, is too great to only accomplish the end of his existence ; if we honor by universal acclaim the man who for right and truth exposes his own life ; by what logic does that become evil in a nation, which in the individual is honor and virtue ? We must meet and conquer evil in the form it happens to take, and if one of these forms be an armed host working wrong, either by its own spontaneous impulse, or at the bidding of a master, what new law comes into operation whereby we are prevented from exposing our lives in this conflict as righteously as we expose them in conflict with the winds and waters in our search after scientific truth or for the produce of distant lands to minister to our needs and luxuries ? It seems to us to come to this—that war is among the various agencies by which man's will has to meet and conquer evil ; and, that like all those agencies it may be either a noble discipline or a degrading and brutalizing excitement of the passions. Which it will be, in any case, depends much upon the motives of the nation which urges it, and on the general tone of morality among its people. If a nation holds national power as a trust, and if the duties towards its own people have not been miserably neglected, war becomes in the hands of such a nation a divine instrument of justice, and the men who carry it on are sublimed into the conscious ministers of eternal right. Only a thoroughly materialistic misinterpretation of Christianity, a general epicureanism of habit, and confused notions about what determines the eternal well being of man, could ever have led to such monstrous doctrines as those propounded by Peace fanatics in reference to recent wars. We turn from such theories to the facts, and find war looking all that is noblest and most manly in a nation, making heroes of peasants and of idlers, hushing the mean jar of faction, except among the basest of mankind, and stirring in the universal heart of a people a strange delightful sense of brotherhood and unity. And if, startled by such result from what we are taught to consider an unmixed evil,—we begin anew to examine the Peace theories promulgated to this day in Europe and America, they resolve themselves into principles which, if

duly carried out, would deliver over man to the dominion of evil—would postpone every noble motive and high principle to a supreme love of life—that would no longer be divine, because divorced from the idea of good, and would soon end in making men the slaves of circumstances and the bondsmen of the brutes of the forest. Surely the old Pagans had a nobler ideal than this of our modern quietists. If manhood, *virtus*, was then too exclusively seen in the strong arm and brave heart, at least these are the ground of all other excellencies in man—and a good Christian can no more be a coward and a materialist than he can be a drunkard and a thief. Women retain their instinctive sense of the truth of this matter, and we hold that the qualities in man which a true woman admires are those which God and nature intended him to have. War has its horrors,—so have railways, and every noble and useful enterprise, just because, mainly, such enterprises are a new conflict with evil, and evil fighteth a hard fight, and exacts toils, and groans, and blood, before it quits its hold. But to redeem the world from evil is man's mission here, and never is evil more gloriously defeated than when armed nations rise indignant against incarnate wrong that has gathered head, sweep away the obstruction to the world's progress, and demean themselves the while as consecrated servants of right and truth.